



Ralph Miles

Oral History Transcription

September 23, 2003 [Side B]

Interviewed by:	David Healey
Place of interview:	Ralph Miles' residence
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Approximate length of interview:	25 minutes
Transcribed by:	Mark Flora, Volunteer, Civil Rights Heritage Center
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Summary:	Ralph Miles moved to South Bend at age 3 in 1952. He spent the next sixty years as a resident of the city, going from a special-needs school to Washington High School and eventually starting his own accounting business, Universal Holy Family Professional Tax Technicians. He talks about South Bend during the 1960s from the perspective of a kid who would start fights, bring a gun to school, and steal cars. He shares a critical view of the area's civil rights groups and figures.

0:00:18 [Ralph Miles]: You know, a lot of people didn't like about him them that they were saying, "Hang Christianity" and "Christ didn't exist" and that's how come a lot of them didn't really participate that much with the black churches, because of the fact that they didn't recognize Jesus.

[David Healey]: Black churches. That brings up another interesting subject. When I look at civil rights history in the south, you'll see black churches took a major lead. Not all black churches. A very small group of black churches took the lead because—many of them didn't want to participate 'cause they were afraid of what would happen to them.

[RM] Retaliation.

[DH]: Yes. But here in South Bend, I don't see—at least, no one's brought to my attention—any particular role black churches played in the Civil Rights Movement.

0:01:05 [RM]: They didn't, really. The different ministers were afraid because they used to come to us and tell us, "Y'all go home. You know you shouldn't be out here doin' all this. It's wrong," and we would tell the ministers, "Get out of our face." We didn't have no respect for 'em because they weren't out there helping us; they would sit up in the pulpit and talk about us on Sunday and we wouldn't see 'em again until next Sunday. As long as their family was eating and their kids were going to school wearing decent clothes, they didn't care what happened.

[DH]: So, who were some of these ministers?

[RM]: Reverend Kirk.

[DH]: Kirk?

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: K-I-R-K?

[RM]: Yeah, the one that was at St. John.

[DH]: Okay.

[RM]: Pastor Dave Davis. Harvey Jones. And there was Diggins.

0:02:05 [DH]: Digginson?

[RM]: Yeah, Diggins. He had a church over here. Ronald Diggins? He was one of the pastors at Claremont there. There were only about three or four real pastors that came up to even talk to us.

[DH]: So, they'd come out, sorta like to pacify you, but they weren't really taking a leadership role.

[RM] Right.

[DH]: That's why in that scene in the—

[RM]: They were there trying to tell us not to fight. "Don't burn. Don't do this. You're gonna get a record. You're gonna get killed." At the time, we were just saying, "We don't care about dyin'." We didn't have nothing. No entertainment, no nothing. So, we just blew up. If we can't have it, they won't have it.

[DH] Well, the black youths still do not have any place to go where they can dance. They don't have any place.

0:02:59 [RM] But that's because of their own actions. See, when we were coming up, we didn't always fight every place we go. We had neutral territories that there was no fighting allowed. Nowadays, every place the youth go, there's problems.

Like, for instance, Movies 16.¹ They went out there about a week or so ago and somebody was shooting in Movies 16 because they brought this here black movie "Barbershop" into town. And it's really dumb because the only thing that's gonna do is make Movies 16 not bring any black films into town because if you bring a black film and it's gonna draw a large black crowd, they're not gonna do it because somebody may get out there and go shooting. So, the youth today messing themselves up because every place they go they don't know how to act civilized.

At least when we went places, we were civilized. We didn't have no fights. Even when we had Sunday dances at Nesbit's, we used to go there every Sunday and had dances, when we got outside the door, the entertainers made sure: no fighting.

0:03:57 [DH]: Well, the violence was not just for violence sake. It had to be a reason.

¹ Mr. Miles is referring to the movie theater on the south side of South Bend at 450 West Chippewa Avenue, now known as AMC South Bend 16.

[RM]: It had to be an objective.

[DH]: An objective for the use of violence, which we don't see today. It seems violence is just everywhere.

[RM]: It's because of the drugs. They found out a way to destroy the black community and they are doing it with the infiltration of drugs into the community.

[DH]: Okay, and "they" being?

[RM]: The powers that be. Because let's face it, there are certain people in places of authority that wants to see drugs in the community. You can't get drugs into this country unless somebody is helping you to bring 'em in.

[DH]: And those people could be black or white or Asian or whatever, but—

[RM]: They just want the money.

0:04:54 [DH]: I think we've covered—Oh! The Junior NAACP, Al Pinado. Do you remember that organization?

[RM]: Yeah, they tried to get started, but they would still, just like the older ones. They were 'who-you-know' or 'what-you-know' as compared to who you are. And that's what's been wrong with a lot of blacks in this community right now. They won't take a grassroot person and work with that person. They'd rather go and get somebody that they feel comfortable with. And this is the whole establishment, like the Democratic Party. Politics just now recently opened up for a lot of us in the Democratic Party because they were afraid they couldn't control you. If they couldn't control you, they didn't want to deal with you.

[DH]: Okay. That makes sense. Alright. Well, I think we've covered—you talk about jobs; you had that one job, but what did you do for jobs after that, as you got to be an adult? Did you see any—

0:05:54 [RM]: Oh, yeah.

[DH]: Discrimination there?

[RM]: Mmm... There really wasn't no discrimination, 'cause I worked for City Pattern and Foundry and I worked in the fabrication division. I was the

only black in that division for a long time because I went in there and proved myself.

[DH]: This company name was what?

[RM]: City Pattern and Foundry.

[DH]: I never heard of that one before.

[RM]: I think they're still in existence. They make moldings right over on Mayflower. And they made aluminum molding where you make your car seats and things of that nature and the bumpers. We had to do the final finishing on the moldings. They taught me how to mold and think of [inaudible] Parcel, Ed Parcel, and he taught me how to do it. I can actually take a piece of metal and by hand make a mold. It just ain't good 'til you get to teaching yourself. No, it wasn't so much being black or white. It was just if you knew how to do the job, you got paid.

0:06:53 But the hardest part was getting in there to prove that you knew how to do it. As a matter of fact, my foreman there his name was Ralph, and he was straight from Tennessee or Virginia, you know, but he didn't care that much. He just told me, "Look, I don't have to go home with you. I don't have to eat dinner with you. I don't have to socialize with you. You're here to do a job. Now, as long as you do your job, we're gonna get along fine. The minute you don't do your job, I don't care what color you are, you're out the door."

[DH]: Straightforward.

0:07:23 [RM]: Yeah. I respected him for it. Mr. Tucker. I remember him walking through the plant every day. Every day he had on a different suit. If he had on a lavender suit, he had lavender shoes. Yellow suit, yellow shoes. He was a multimillionaire. He would come through that foundry and he'd speak to you. And the only thing that really messed me up with City Pattern is a group of individuals that talked me into going out there and bringing a lawsuit against them for discrimination. It wasn't discrimination based on my race. It was because they were afraid because I wore a brace. They didn't want me in their foundry because, they said, if I ever slipped carrying one of those 150-pound molds over my head, it would kill me. So, they were really more afraid of me hurting myself in there than anything else.

[DH]: I see.

0:08:15 [RM]: But I worked there for quite a while. I started making about \$6 an hour, [inaudible] about \$9 an hour. But it just got so dangerous in there that their insurance wouldn't really cover me. I thought it was for discrimination because of race and I later found out it was not because of race, it was because of my handicap.

[DH]: But still a form of discrimination.

[RM]: True, but in a way it did me a great service because if hadn't'a got outta there, I wouldn't be here today.

[DH]: One door closes, another one opens.

[RM]: Exactly.

[DH]: Okay. Now, you were talking about Kresge's. Describe Kresge's for me.

0:08:54 [RM]: Okay. Kresge's, that was the gathering point. That's where all the buses would let you off right down the street, down there by the bank. Everybody would walk to Kresge's. When you walk into the back door, that's where all the black was at. Up near the front is where all the whites were at. There was a great big, humongous department store, almost like your Meijer's, but it sat right on the corner of Jefferson and Michigan. You walk in there, you could get anything you want in Kresge's. They had a great big ol' downstairs, a bargain basement. So Kresge's was the place to be. If you didn't hang out at Kresge's, you didn't hang out no place.

[DH]: But blacks were served in a different area?

[RM]: Oh yeah. The blacks were back there on the Jefferson side, when you come in the back door. That's where the blacks were at.

[phone rings]

0:09:52 [RM]: So, you know, for Kresge's, like I said, most of the uppity black kids, they did go up there in the front part of Kresge's because they had the money. Up there, you had to have money to eat at that part. So, you really could almost say that back in the back is where they sold you the hot dogs and the potato chips and the cold drink and you didn't really have a place to sit because one of the rules that Kresge's had was you had to keep moving. We couldn't congregate and that's why, I guess, a lot of the young ones stayed back there. They'd go there and get their hot dogs, their stuff,

and they'd walk around the store eating it.

[DH]: What about Woolworth's? Did you ever go to Woolworth's?

[RM]: No. I mostly dealt with Kresge's and right next door to Kresge's was Robertson's. I even got a job at Robertson's working at night.

[DH]: Okay. What'd you do at Robertson's?

0:10:48 [RM]: I was a maintenance man. If the store's closed, they would lock us in. Mr. McDonald was my foreman and we would clean. I remember, you'd go up on the top floor at Robertson's and they had a beautiful tea room where they entertained dignitaries and all that and they had beautiful silver. He was black, Mr. McDonald, but he was the only black man I know that had the keys to run someplace. He could just open it up anytime he'd want. They really trusted him. That's one of the people that made me feel that, okay. It's better to be trusted and respected than to be feared and rejected.

[DH]: Now, I heard that Robertson's never discriminated against black people even if they were—

[RM]: Robertson's was for the money. They didn't care what color you were; if you had the money, they treated you the same.

[DH]: What about other restaurants in town? Were there some places that you didn't feel welcome at?

[RM]: Oh yeah. A lot of places.

0:11:48 [DH]: Such as?

[RM]: Like over here on the west end, you didn't go out here on the corner of Sample. They had the G&H. You didn't go in there.

[DH]: There were three of those G&H's. One downtown—

[RM]: One on the west side and one on Mishawaka Avenue.

[DH]: I've heard that, that they would not accept black patrons.

[RM]: That was one. Azar's, for a long time. You couldn't go inside Azar. They would serve you in your car but you couldn't go inside. Then there

was another restaurant that's out of business.

0:12:19 It used to be called Tip Top. It was right on the corner of Chicago and Western. That was where all the blacks went, especially after hours. You'd go in there and you could eat because then they turn into the one-hour Martinizing Cleaner. So yeah, there were about several. Then there's several restaurants that were further out that you couldn't go into. If you were black, they didn't serve you. It was more or less because I guess more people were afraid of how black youth would react, not so much the color of their skin.

0:12:52 [DH]: Did you ever go to the Natatorium?

[RM]: Oh yeah. I swam there a couple times.

[DH]: And what was the Natatorium like?

[RM]: Well, it was mostly for blacks. When you go in there, it'd just be a bunch of blacks in the Natatorium on the night that we went. But you could only go on certain nights. So, the nights that we went it was for the blacks and then other nights it was for the whites.

[DH]: What about Playland Park? Did you ever...

[RM]: Yeah, we went out there. That's where we were skating and that's was one of the neutral territories where we didn't have fights. There were no gang fights allowed up there.

0:13:25 Playland Park would bring different name-brand entertainers out there. I remember Jackie Wilson, somebody came here, did some shows out there. Playland Park was the place to be. It was an amusement park. We used to go out there and ride the rides and everything because we were right on the river. It was fun times. Then they tore that down and then they built the stadium rink up there. They took Playland Park down because of the fights.

0:13:56 [DH]: But you said there was a neutral—

[RM]: It was supposed to be neutral but somehow they still talked the kids into fighting. Whoever wanted to clear a particular part of town for whatever reason, they'd pay the kids to go in there and start fighting or firebombing. Say, for instance, somebody wanted to clear a part of Western Avenue.

[DH]: Say you wanted to clear out the Glow Worm or any of those places.

[RM]: Okay. Go into the neighborhood. Find three or four of the main people in the neighborhood that can carry the clout and pay them to go up there and firebomb it or start fighting stuff.

0:14:36 [DH]: That gives the excuse for the city to come in and raze the earth.

[RM]: Right. So, a lot of things that happened back then, it was not because of racial; it was because somebody wanted to clear that land or somebody didn't want a particular entity in there because it was making too much money and they wanted to get rid of it. So, they paid us to do it.

[DH]: Now, did you ever actually witness money changing hands?

0:15:06 [RM]: I was actually paid money to do some things.

[DH]: Could you mention what those things were and who paid you?

[RM]: No, 'cause that wouldn't be too wise.

[DH]: [laughing] No that probably wouldn't be too wise, but maybe someday.

[RM]: Right. I'm just gonna say this one thing: one of the people that helped me to change and turn my life around was Harry Heppenheimer.

[DH]: Harry... Never heard that name before.

[RM]: Harry Heppenheimer. He was a judge. When I broke this policeman's jaw, he was the judge that sentenced me and he told me I was too intelligent to be sitting up there acting like I'm acting and told me to come to his law office after school, and he gave me pointers on the law, accounting, and things of that nature. That's when I finally had the love of figures and accounting and I found that I can do more with a pen than I could with a brick any day.

0:16:04 [DH]: Well someday, maybe we can go into this, but we're talking about the city administration, we will say that. The Mayors [inaudible] Parent and Mayor Allen and that era.

[RM]: Even Nemeth.

[DH]: Nemeth.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: You actually got money from some of these organizations.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: Well, we'll leave it at that. Okay. Is there anything you think I should ask you that I didn't?

[RM]: The whole thing is about where we are going today and how can we solve the problems that we're having today.

0:16:53 [DH]: We have lots of problems and of course, part of our focus here is to study the Civil Rights Movement and try to learn from it, but part of the problem I see is that we focus so much on the black history of the Civil Rights Movement that we forget that white folks were involved in it.

[RM]: A lot of white folks were involved.

[DH]: If you're gonna regenerate it, you gotta generate both places.

[RM]: There's Mike Succini.

[DH]: Heard that name before.

[RM]: He was one of the teachers that—he was white, but Mike was alright. He would walk up on you, you didn't care if he had a knife, a gun, or whatever. He'd just tell you to shoot him. He was good. He was over in LaSalle school and when he was over there, LaSalle was doing alright, but now when he left and LaSalle went down. It's just like if you put too many of the same kind in a particular area, it's gonna be destroyed and that's why everybody talking about Plan Z.²

0:17:51 It may not be the best plan in the world, but it's better than no plan and they need to give it a chance to work. Everybody's jumping up, howling about, "they closing LaSalle School." They needed to close LaSalle High School. Half the people coming out of LaSalle, they were into drugs, everything there was negative. They didn't really do anything with all that positive. Plan Z just simply gives them a better chance because, if you look at what's happening today, most of your black athletes—they're not

² Mr. Miles is referring to the 2000 desegregation program in South Bend Community School Corporation.

getting scholarships like they used to because they haven't won nothing. Scouts are not gonna scout a losing high school team. Now Penn, every year, you see scouts out there galore, because they win.

0:18:35 [DH]: True.

[RM]: But at Washington and at LaSalle and at Adams and at Riley, you don't hardly see nothing. Because why? They're losing. So, if anything, we need to get back on track like we used to. When we had the [inaudible]. They didn't care what your color of your skin was. If you were good, you got to play. If you weren't, you didn't play.

[DH]: Like Neisman. He's looking for talent.

[RM]: There you go. It's like when Notre Dame wins. I really respect him because he's another man that doesn't look at the color of your skin. He looks at your ability. Like he told this one quarterback, if the opportunity arrives, if God see fit that you have a chance of shining in the light, do your best to make it your best.

0:19:22 [DH]: Well, he's winning with the same people that Davie had.

[RM]: Yeah.

[DH]: I mean, they're already starting freshman out there.

[RM]: But it's all in how you treat a person. You got to make a person feel like they're worth something. Just like this business that I have. Yes, it's a ministry. I don't get paid for doing what I'm doing, but I do it because I enjoy it. It gives me an opportunity to help people. And when I can make a phone call and help somebody to get a problem resolved, it makes me feel good.

0:19:55 So, it's not about the money, but it's about helping. Doing something. Helping young students to be responsible, showing them that you don't have to be out there doing anything and everything in the book selling drugs because you can make \$5 raking leaves or you can make \$5 running drugs, but raking those leaves... your chances of living is a lot longer than running those drugs. So, it's time for the blacks to take it back up on themselves, to do for themselves. Quit looking for somebody else to do it for them. What are you gonna do for yourself?

0:20:34 [DH]: That's all it boils down to wherever you go.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: Do for yourself.

[RM]: I went to Michigan City one time, Merrillville, and there was some situation where I had to get somebody out of jail. They weren't gonna give him a chance to get out of jail at first, but I did talk to him and some more people talked to him, but I remember the man giving me a little sign that said, "I will help you out. Which way did you come in? May God's blessing be with you." And I always remember that because it tells me one thing: if you come in and you're positive and you show respect, no matter who you're dealing with, then more than likely you're gonna get respect. But you come in there with a chip on your shoulder, 'I'm black and I'm looking for you to give me a hard time, I'm gonna give you a hard time first,' you're gonna meet a hard time.

0:21:22 [DH]: So, what would you—I've asked this question—today's youth. They seem to be... talk about a generation gap. I talked with a young black freshman girl and I told her about the Civil Rights Heritage Center and the Civil Rights Movement and she said, "No. I don't need to know anything about the Civil Rights Movement. My mother told me everything I need to know."

0:21:52 [RM]: She's dumb for saying that because you need to know. If you don't know about every aspect of a situation, like I told my son, "If you don't know about your past, you're gonna repeat the mistakes." So, history teaches you not to make the same mistakes twice. I'll go through and let certain people pay me and buy my color to do certain things that today they couldn't pay me to do, but at the time the money looked good. I needed the money, but now, today, I can look them in the eye and tell them no thank you. But when you have to feed a wife and a child and they make you an offer you can't refuse, whatcha gonna do?

[DH]: How would you compare your youth and your son's youth growing up here in South Bend?

0:22:47 [RM]: My son has an opportunity now because it's not nearly as prejudiced today as it was when I was coming up.

[DH]: That's good.

[RM]: So nowadays, they don't care about the color of your skin because if you look around, you see it all the time: white girls and black boys, black

boys and white girls, Hispanics, I mean, it's like a melting pot. And some of these old, die-hard people are turning over in their graves, but we are more and more becoming a united front—and that's what's different. People today judge you more or less for what you are as an individual, and not because of the color of your skin.

[DH]: I agree with that. But we still have things like racial profiling.

[RM]: They'll always have that. It's very profitable.

[DH]: Well, it taps into your fear.

[RM]: Also, it helps to make it very profitable, too.

[DH]: How does it make it profitable?

0:23:46 [RM]: If I wanted to keep a certain segment of town all white, for instance, I'm gonna go out there and buy a piece of land, and make it all white, I can sell that for \$30,000 a lot. As long as I know that only whites can basically afford it. But now the minute I let a black person in there, I'm not gonna be able to sell it for \$30,000. So therefore, I'm gonna do my best to keep all blacks out of there, because it would lower the property value. Not that they would be disruptive to the community, but it's just that the people that I'm selling to are so prejudiced that they'll pay me ten times what that land is worth just to not live around a black.

[DH]: Tap into their fear.

[RM]: Mm-hmm.

[DH]: Okay.

[RM]: I learned from the best.

[DH]: Anything else you think I should—

0:24:40 [RM]: Gladys and Lynn Coleman and the rest of them that said they were out there... I didn't even know Gladys even knew about the stockade, but I assume she did because otherwise how did she know there was a handicapped guy that was me that started it?

[DH]: And she got arrested.

[RM]: Well, I'm sorry she got arrested for my crime.

[DH]: She and her brother got arrested that day.

[RM]: And I'm the one that started it.

[DH]: So, you're the one that started it. Well, let me shake your hand. I've heard about you in different interviews. Now I get to meet you. Okay...

[Audio ends]